

[Review] Matthew T. Prior (2016) Emotion and discourse in L2 narrative research

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Matthew T. Prior, *Emotion and Discourse in L2 Narrative Research*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2016; xiii + 260 pp., £29.95 (pbk).

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In contrast to the mass movement of migrants shown in the media, Prior's study gives a glimpse into the emic detail of migrant lives when their journey is over. Much of the book is devoted to a self-reflexive discourse analysis of extracts from a series of interviews with East Asian refugees, focusing on contributions seen as problematic. First, though, Prior resolves to remedy the absence of reflexivity in traditional conversation analysis and disclose his own emotional history in the context of his professional biography. He describes how an earlier empirical investigation into migrants' language learning experiences had included research interviews in which the participants persistently told stories about themselves, producing the data that are recycled here. It is the author's biographical narrative, followed by the interview excerpts, and similar extracts from transcriptions in the literature, that is among the most readable sections of the book.

Prior notes in chapter 1 that emotion research is widely stigmatised and inimical to an academic career. Perhaps it is for this reason that, in the tradition of much narrative research, the book is self-consciously scholarly, with copious citations and a challenging style in which every claim is modified, supplemented and disassembled in the interests of reflexivity. The following chapter is a stark reminder that the provisional nature of truth in autobiographical interviews is discursively constructed for the benefit of the researcher. This chapter introduces Prior's key analytic approaches, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA). Chapter 3 is the closest the author gets to a formal description of the interactional sequences of autobiographical interview stories, from pre-preface to post-story material. It is followed by two chapters that focus on the way in which the interviewer invites emotional tellings by means of (1) direct feeling questions, such as 'How does that feel?' (page 117), and so-called emotion-implicative questions, eg 'Was it hard for you sometimes?' (page 120).

In chapter 6, Prior draws parallels with another form of institutional talk, therapeutic interviews, identifying in both the role of reformulations, which enable 'intersubjective understandings' (page 140). However, whilst the therapist maintains virtual anonymity so that the client does not tailor their talk towards or away from the therapist's perceived identity, Prior, who has 'developed social relationships with each of the participants' (page 12) is unable to achieve a similar distance. Repeatedly noting the contribution of the interviewer to the content and structure of the interview data, Prior confronts the competing demands of friendship and researcher objectivity. Although part of his thesis is that the collection of pristine data is impossible, contamination is predictable when the interviewer switches role. Where formerly researchers largely redacted themselves from the account, it has now become almost mandatory for social science reports that include direct researcher involvement, such as participant observation, to include a section on researcher reflection on the process, Prior's argument is that researcher presence and contribution to interview data in particular must be more generally acknowledged and even celebrated. One likely problematic influence on the data in this study is the author's social and linguistic status. Both are a constant reminder to Prior's participants of what they are not and do not possess: 'I rate myself about half of what you know,' says Bona to Prior, '... because you are an American ... you was born here and your mom and day (.) American?' (Bona, page 43). It is little wonder that some participants take the opportunity, as the interviewer's ear is offered them, to indulge in troubles telling, a common form of social intimacy.

Chapter 7 comprises the emotive heart of the book and reveals the author's fears of emotional 'contagion' and even 'danger'. It is largely built around an example of the participant Trang's need for recognition and Prior's withholding it. Prior acknowledges elsewhere that the participants themselves are open to harm by the indulgence of a negativity that is perhaps more likely to surface in such open-ended interviews. Here, Prior's post-hoc recognition of his own resistance to Trang's repeated invitations to make an affiliative response is one of a number of insights gained from the self-reflexive analysis of the data. Whilst Prior suggests his own motivation was to maintain a professional focus on the interview agenda, it underlines the problems of managing the

longitudinal research interview. It is as if, in honorifics, the V-form, having become T- by common agreement, is reset to V- by the interviewer; the interviewee resists. The penultimate chapter discusses the tendency towards negative orientation in L2 autobiographical interviews. Rather like the minor key in music, there may be something more intrinsically narrative-like in troubles telling, the teller seeking resolution of their conflict. By comparison, happiness is a transitory state worthy only of passing note. In his assessment of the book's contributions in the final chapter, Prior shows unusual awareness of some of the possible reactions to and criticisms of the book. Key points are summarised.

By adopting a quasi-discourse analytical approach, Prior is excused from supplying very much circumstantial detail and the reader gains little insight into the participants' social worlds or their linguistic and migratory journeys. Rather, much of the interest is directed to researcher behaviour and the interview process. The literature is copiously cited, the excerpts meticulously analysed, the discussion painstakingly constructed. Prior acknowledges shortcomings with a notable candour, and he calls for other researchers to be equally open about the mixed successes of their qualitative research projects. Although the book might stand as a warning of the risks of mining data collected for other purposes, Prior's insights through retrospective analysis into researcher interview behaviour are illuminating and his call for specialist training to raise awareness of the particular demands made on the autobiographical research interviewer, and consequently on the participants, from the emotional turn of the interaction, positive as well as negative, is well grounded. Prior asserts that his intended readership is L2 scholars. In fact, the many insights he offers into discourse, identity construction and qualitative research generally, particularly in the later chapters, deserve a much wider audience.